

Shaking the Trees: The Psychology of Collecting in U.S. Newspaper Coverage of the College Admissions Process

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Abstract

A frame analysis was conducted to explore themes in recent coverage by print journalists of the college application process, with special attention paid to the use by reporters of “keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (Entman, p. 52) about this experience. The analysis revealed checklist, panic, hunt, and packaging frames as the experience was reduced to prospective students collecting attractive experiences and cobbling them together into a compelling package. Through these frames, journalists and the experts they consult urge students to focus solely on how their experiences will make them more attractive to universities acting clearly as collectors. All of the parties involved in the college admissions process are collectors, at least as described by journalists. Students are persuaded that they must begin their collecting early, as early as junior high school. College recruiters and admissions counselors collect worthy students for their institutions.

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Introduction

There is little disagreement about the importance of a college education to the development of a career. A college degree increases one's earning power. Individuals who obtain college degrees earn \$23,000 per year more than those who have only their high school diplomas (Olemacher, 2006). Nearly 70 percent of high school seniors in 2005 enrolled in the nation's colleges and universities, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (www.nces.ed.gov). This figure jumped from 49 to 67 percent between 1972 and 1997, dropped to 62 percent in 2001 before rebounding four years later. Enrollment in college, reported the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC), is at an all-time high, with more than 16 million students enrolled in 2005 (www.nacacnet.org). Fueled in part by increased use of online applications (49 percent of students applied online in 2005, up from 43 percent the year before), nearly three-fourths of the nation's colleges and universities report receiving more applications than in the previous year. Although many colleges and universities claim to be more selective when it comes to admissions than in the past, 70 percent of students who apply to four-year institutions are accepted, NACAC noted.

Yet it seems as though students and parents are misreading these statistics, at least if reports in the news media are to be believed. The dialogue about the process of applying to college is charged with urgency. Armed with well-intended guidebooks and laptops, high school juniors and seniors feverishly piece together the lists of schools to which they will apply. They take expensive SAT prep courses; they make their applications literally bulge with the extracurricular activities that they believe admissions officials are looking for. Friends, counselors, and the news media tell them not to be discouraged (and their parents not to panic) if they don't get into an Ivy League school; there are many second-tier "hidden gems" out there.

Perhaps, as the noted media critic Neil Postman might have argued, this approach stems from the overemphasis placed by universities – and echoed by parents – on seeing the university experience as little more than a set of tools that will enable a student to get a job. Postman lamented the lack of core ideas at the heart of "modern secular education" (1992, p. 186). Most courses of study, he claimed, subject a student to a "meaningless hodgepodge of subjects." Instead of teaching students to think critically, we send out into the world "a technocrat's ideal – a person with no commitment and no point of view but with plenty of marketable skills," Postman contended. There is no "purpose, meaning, and interconnectedness in what they learn" (p. 186).

Assigning blame for these developments is not the purpose of this research. But to sustain our current system of higher education requires that the nation's colleges and universities nurture an ideology that encourages students to view obtaining an education as a string of disparate acquisitions. They are persuaded to treat gaining an education as though they were putting together a collection of items. This is especially evident, the current study contends, during the application process. The news media are a significant contributor to the entrenchment of that ideology, and it is the discursive approach taken by reporters who cover the rush to get into college that is at the heart of my research.

Hither and Thither

The French semiotician Jean Baudrillard (1996) contended that we collect in order to reconnect to the past, to “divinity, to nature, to primitive knowledge” (p. 76). Items in a collection represent to the collector “absolute reality” and “symbolize an inward transcendence, that phantasy of a centre-point in reality which nourishes all mythological consciousness, all individual consciousness – that phantasy whereby a projected detail comes to stand for the ego, and the rest of the world is then organized around it” (p. 79). Taken together, the items in a collection help us navigate through our experiences. They enable us to exert control over events. In some cases, Baudrillard argued, the items and the act of collecting become so important that we “become” our collections.

Items in a collection “express dynamic processes within people, among people, and between people and the total environment,” argued Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 43). The self is a reflection of the things with which we interact. Things “embody goals, make skills manifest, and shape the identities of their users” (p. 2). It would be impossible to try and make sense of “all the feelings, memories, and thoughts that constitute what one is;” To facilitate this task, we use “representations that stand for the vast range of experiences that make up and shape the self.” We attend to an item – or a piece of information – purposively, selecting it from all available information. “When attending to something, we do so in order to in order to realize some intention,” Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton contended (p. 5). Social systems are built on these “structures of attention,” which are shared among their members. Collectors make up one such system. The goals of the group shape the selves of those who make up the system, they argued.

Of particular importance to this research is their notion that an object becomes “charged” when we invest our psychic energy in it. Such an investment comes with a cost; we lose part of our ability “to experience the world, to process information, to pursue goals” (p. 8) when we invest energy in an object “to the exclusion of other possibilities.” Windsor (1994) argued that the collector’s perception of the world is at once “fragmented” and “changeable.” We pursue a disconnected series of objects that are, when taken together, the keys to our happiness. “In this state the attention is drawn hither and thither between different objects of desire without being nourished by the underlying unity experienceable from within,” he noted (p. 49).

Baudrillard (1996) asserted that items in a collection have two functions: “to be put to use and to be possessed.” Bal (1994) speculated that what is actually at work is a series of “confrontations” between “subjective agency informed by an attitude” (p. 100). We can use objects, as discussed earlier, to “exert control over the real world” (1994, p. 8). Compiling and owning the items in a collection suggests that we wish to “assert” ourselves “as an autonomous totality outside the world.” Thus, there is clear intent in the compilation of items. Often, as Bal explained, the intent is to convey the impression that our “past” is more than the sum of its parts (p. 99). We want desperately to create a compelling story about ourselves through these items, argued Susan Pearce (quoted in Bal, p. 103).

When an item no longer has a function, or use value, it “takes on a strictly subjective status: it becomes part of a collection” (Baudrillard, p. 86). All objects are roughly the same. This is a problem for collectors: they seek items for their collection knowing there is a nearly endless string of items left to collect. The only satisfaction comes from collecting more – the “hunt,” as collectors call it. An item is not fully realized until it is part of a collection. To remain empowered, collectors must in essence “reacquire” the items; the solidity of the item – its history, the sentimental narrative behind its acquisition – is left to “dissolve in the presence of the newly acquired weight of the characteristics the commodity shares with other goods” (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 70). A Marxist might argue that the use value of a collectible disappears, leaving behind only its exchange value. The item no longer has a core set of traits; instead, it is removed from its context, defined fluidly, according to the desires of a collector. Susan Pearce would call this “fetishistic” collecting (quoted in Windsor, p. 50). Pearce believed that one can also engage in systematic collecting (acquiring objects to create a collection with a clear ideological flavor) and souvenir collecting (acquiring objects because of their ability to help us remember the past).

Clusters of collectors become “centers of accumulated energy,” according to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (p. 35). They are carried away by the “essential force of the clan,” a force that gives them their sense of purpose. They differentiate themselves, rather than integrating themselves and their passion, threatening the links between the self and the “vast purposes of the environment,” as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton contend. They pursue control – and sustain connectedness with the collecting community – “at the expense of relatedness with other purposes” (p. 39).

As suggested earlier, the psychology of collecting is relevant to the present study because students receive a great deal of information about applying for college from a variety of sources: high school counselors, college admissions professionals, guidebooks, websites, and the news media. Much of this information, it is argued here, is rooted in an ideology that encourages prospective college students to treat the application process – and, later, the act of attending college, though this is beyond the scope of this paper – as a series of discrete transactions with the aim of acquiring and possessing information, information whose only use is to ensure that the student will go on to obtain a good job.

Exploring this assertion revolves around these research questions: What frames emerge from newspaper coverage of the college application process? What is the preferred reading of the application process suggested by these frames? Do journalists suggest through these frames that prospective college students treat applying to college as an act of collecting?

Method

A frame analysis was performed in April 2007 on articles about the college application process that appeared in U.S. newspapers between September 2006 and March 2007. The newspapers whose work is included in the study come from all parts of the country, ensuring that the experiences of a variety of students, at least as described by journalists, were explored. During this period, the rush of students to

apply to colleges and universities is at its most feverish. Students have typically completed their on-campus visits, and have turned their attention to applications.

A series of Lexis-Nexis searches produced 36 articles. Articles were included in the analysis only if the college application was the focus of the story. This was determined by examining the story headlines. If the word “application” appeared in the headline, or the headline talked of the application process, the story was obtained for analysis. Articles were read several times, with detailed notes taken on each one. Frames emerged from repeated reading of the articles and notes.

Frame Analysis

Frames direct attention to certain aspects of a news story. Some scholars argue that frames even suggest to us how we should view a story – the “preferred reading” of the facts. Noted sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) wrote that a frame is a “principle of organization which governs events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them” (p. 11). Frames enable us to “locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences” (p. 21). We use frames to make sense of the world around us. Journalists create news frames to help them “simplify, prioritize, and structure the narrative flow of events (Norris, 1995, p. 357). As Oscar Gandy (2001) explains, frames “are used purposively to direct attention and then to guide the processing of information so that the preferred reading of the facts come to dominate public understanding” (p. 365).

Jamieson and Waldman (2002) contended that frames are “the structures underlying the depictions that the public reads, hears, and watches” (p. xii). Framing takes place when journalists “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). By attempting to organize experiences for readers, journalists “highlight some bits of information about an item that is the subject of communication, thereby elevating them in salience” (p. 53). Bennett (2005) argued that journalists tend to deploy “episodic” frames that revolve around the personalization of events, more often than “thematic” frames, through which journalists can systematically explore an issue, and explore its place in a broader social or political context (pp. 213-214). Through their reporting, Paul D’Angelo claimed, journalists provide “interpretive packages” of the positions of parties who have a political investment in an issue. In so doing, journalists “both reflect and add” to what Gamson and Modigliani (1987) call the “issue culture” of a topic.

The focus of the current study was the use by reporters of “keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (Entman, p. 52) about the college application experience. The variety of sources called on by journalists to provide perspective and expertise was also examined. Journalists select sources because they are credible, and believe that even a longstanding frame has value because it contains “a range of viewpoints that is potentially useful” to our understanding of an issue (D’Angelo, 2002, p. 877). One tendency in the work of reporters stands out right away: four of the stories analyzed for this paper were written by high school students (Natividad, 2006, Altman, 2007, Glueck, 2007, Vecchio, 2007) who were mounting their own efforts to gain admission to college. An “independent college admission

advisor” wrote two of the stories (Levy-Prewitt, 2007a, 2007b). In these instances, journalists decided that first-person perspective, despite its attendant lack of objectivity, was more valuable to readers than objective coverage of this issue.

Like many scholars who have performed frame analyses, D’Angelo (2002) cautioned that a frame can limit our understanding of a subject or an issue, echoing Entman (1991), who claims that the ideas contained in frames can push out, or marginalize, competing interpretations of events. “While framing does not eliminate challenges to the dominant story line, it subverts their influence by diminishing their salience” (p. 21). In his well-known book, *The Whole World is Watching*, Todd Gitlin (1980) argued that frames are “persistent patterns of cognition, organization, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (p. 7). Frames give shape to what parts of a story are told, what parts are given prominence, which sources are used, what groups are marginalized through their portrayal as deviant or illegitimate, and what words are used to describe the parties to a story.

Each of the frames that emerged from the analysis of the news articles will now be described in turn.

The Checklist

Many of the articles reviewed for this analysis revolve around an unmistakable *checklist* frame. With the help of guidance counselors, independent consultants, and college admissions representatives, reporters compile lists of the elements students must acquire or achieve if they have a reasonable expectation of getting into a desired college or university. Journalists suggest that students have only begun to see these achievements and experiences as a collector would a desired item. Bal noted that we see ourselves as a collector “when a series of haphazard purchases or gifts suddenly become a meaningful sequence” (1994, p. 101).

Coverage suggests that this realization happens sooner, perhaps as early as junior high school, for students than in the past. Excellent grades in the hardest possible courses, extracurricular activities, glowing letters of recommendation, a compelling essay – students should now pursue these items with the zeal, or “eagerness” (Bal, p. 102) of a collector endeavoring to enhance a collection. “It’s college application crunch time,” wrote Johnson (2006). “Tests should be taken, letters of recommendation written, transcripts requested, the decision between attending an in-state v. out-of-state school made.”

High school juniors should first ask, “what is it that colleges are looking for?” (Vrieling, 2006) and then set off to find it. Students are properly prepared only after they have cobbled together the “perfect combination” of these elements. A personal statement in which allows “the real you to shine through” is also a key step; journalists suggest it should be easy to sum up one’s personality and experiences in a few hundred words. Even self-awareness is something to be collected, packaged, and displayed. A high school counselor quoted by Alijentera (2006) let readers know that “students are forced to learn a lot about themselves when they are filling out college applications, answering questions, and writing essays.”

Students are urged not to delay in completing their applications (journalists often include in their stories calendars with key deadlines as a reminder to students), in part to diffuse the tension that students so often feel during this time in their lives. “You’ve got to prepare for your final crack at the SAT, decide whether it’s worth the gamble of applying early admission, put the finishing touches on the applications – all the while trying to snag the best grades in impressive classes,” wrote Berman (2006, p. 12). In the lead to an October 2006 article, a reporter for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* remarked that a local high school senior “has the raw material for a strong college application: a Washington Mutual internship, good grades, and a spot on the varsity baseball team” (Nyhan, 2006, p. B1).

Students should gain meaningful experience in a few extracurricular activities rather than try to pad their resume with a list of activities in which they have limited involvement, suggest reporters. Glueck (2006) quoted an admissions representative from Boston College as saying, “We want students to be passionate about their activities, and we want to see a willingness to follow through on them.” Go the proverbial extra mile, suggests Stevenson (2006, p. A7) by fashioning your own extracurricular activities. “Colleges are looking for self-starters,” he writes. But in the previous story, written by a junior at a Kansas City-area high school junior, another admissions rep reminds students that even a comprehensive list of these activities is less important “than a good transcript.”

And even when an admissions representative or consultant urges students to “be themselves” or to find a subject for which they feel genuine passion, journalists still frame these comments as containing just another element that a student must feverishly try to collect in the allotted time. “Colleges want something original and they want you to be you,” Hill (2006, p. D1) wrote in the *Tulsa World*. A truly creative extracurricular project or an essay based on a compelling or extremely emotional personal experience is of the same value as strong SAT scores or a gushing recommendation from a former teacher. “It is hard,” one student told Alijentera (2006) about her quest to find the right experience on which to base her personal essay, “getting to the word count and it is difficult to find the right experience.” Any experience, so long as it has the characteristics sought after by an admissions representative, will do, journalists suggest.

Recall Windsor’s contention that the attention of a collector totally immersed in the pursuit of an object is “drawn hither and thither between different objects of desire without being nourished by the underlying unity experienceable from within” (p. 49). At this stage of the process, it does not matter so much which college one wants to attend, journalists write, so long as the student collects an advantageous array of grades and activities, and spreads his or her admissions net widely, and over the “right” schools – those schools imbued by this collecting community with such overwhelming significance.

The same would hold true for students, noted Schevitz, who waited until they learned whether they were granted early admission to send out another round of applications. Students interviewed by Schevitz suggested that while procrastination was one cause for the delay, students also still had to manage school and extracurricular activities – or, in the terms emerging from our discussion, ensure that their collection continued to be enticingly packaged.

Panic

Journalists convey the impression that the application process is extremely stressful by deploying a *panic* frame. The phrase “crunch time” is a favorite of these reporters. This approach suggests an image of collectors visiting flea markets, attending auctions, and using online websites like eBay, all to track down their supposed treasures. “Stressed out” (Stevenson, 2006, p. A7) students sag under the “increasingly feverish pressure” to complete their applications and gain entry into at least one or two of the hallowed institutions on their “wish lists” (Pope, 2006). One student told Tuinstra (2006) that he was “baffled” by the process. Journalists suggest that students, especially those who put off compiling their materials, will spend sizable chunks of time – time otherwise spent enjoying, or enduring, holidays with family, on vacation, or just hanging around – frantically trying to catch up while at the same time managing the workload from their classes. “The clock is ticking,” wrote a reporter for the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* (Johnson, 2006).

A high school senior from Florida “sat at the computer typing furiously” as his mother and sister decorated their home for Christmas (Sanchez, 2006, p. BS1). For high school seniors, suggested Fabiano (2006), application deadlines hang over their heads “like a dark cloud,” as if their hopes will be permanently dashed, and their lives ruined, if these deadlines are not met. Hill sets the scene faced, she suggests, by numerous college students across the country: “It’s midnight. Empty Red Bull cans cover every inch of the floor, and you are sitting in front of your computer, watching the computer blink.”

Several journalists heightened the tension by choosing to write “staccato” leads for their stories. In a staccato lead, three or four words, short phrases, or sentences are strung together that produce a noticeable rhythm (www.ewritersplace.com). Later paragraphs in the story contextualize the string of thoughts for the reader. For example, Pope (2006) wrote, “SAT tutors. High-priced essay coaches. Over-the-top parents who make selecting a college feel like a matter of life and death.” He suggests that this urgency is felt more by parents in certain admissions “hot spots” in the northeastern and western United States.

Glueck’s (2006) approach was a bit more sanguine: “Yup, it’s that time of year again – time for seniors to sweat over obscure essay questions, time for juniors to fret over the PSAT, time for college fairs and college applications.” Most often, however, the tone of coverage is far more foreboding. A high school senior writing for a California newspaper referred to the admissions process as a “jungle,” which tests a student’s ability to navigate its “murky waters.” An article in the Chattanooga Times Free Press (Natvidad, 2006, p. E1) described the typical senior year as a “labyrinth of dates and deadlines.”

Like college admissions representatives, journalists tend to reduce high school to a mad dash to collect the experiences needed to impress the colleges of their choice. Eric Stern of the Sacramento Bee began an October 2006 story with a staccato lead that conveys a clear sense of the tension felt by high school juniors as they struggle to complete their applications:

Mailboxes stuffed with glossy college brochures like credit card applications. The jockeying and jeering over the latest *U.S. New and World Report* rankings. Cafeteria lunch tables turned into information booths at college fairs. The last-chance retaking of SATs. (p. B1).

Stern suggests that this period for high school students is one of “panic and uncertainty.” He quotes a college-bound high school senior who has applied to three Ivy League schools: “All the pain and suffering...everything comes down to this” (Stern, 2006). Not only are students “clamoring” for the few available spots in a class; Stern conveys the impression that university admissions officials are themselves engaged in collecting suitable students. They want to know why a student wants to attend. “Let us feel like you’re writing to us,” an admissions representative said (Woodward, 2006). “That really helps make a case.”

A 17-year-old student told Woodward (2006) that thinking about applying “is a little overwhelming.” Navas (2006, p. 16), writing in *The Oregonian*, suggested that students “roll out the coffee, eyedrops and Wite-Out” in order to properly prepare for the “long nights in the next two months during peak season” for applications. Panic is also clearly felt by parents. Reporters often suggest that parents bring the panic on themselves by not acting soon enough to properly package their child. Stephanie Dunnewind of the *Seattle Times* (2006) practically shouted in her lead, “It’s senior year, and your child can’t tick off a list of prestigious awards and leadership activities to fill out his/her college application? Start panicking!”

Dunnewind eased off in the following paragraph, but then informed parents that, according to the college admissions guides (that they are urged to buy), they were either irresponsibly uninvolved in the admissions process, or overprotective, “lacking confidence in your child’s abilities.” The proper role, say experts quoted in her story, is that of “travel agent.” Parents map the route to admission, then let the child go – but only if the parent buys the book that calls for this approach. But don’t allow too much time pass before your son or daughter consults the map. “All summer, I was like, ‘I have to start someday,’ ” a high school senior told Woodward. “It’s kind of daunting. Slowly and in baby steps, I worked my way up to it.” Not the recommended course, according to admissions officials: “Dive right in and the sooner the better” in order to maximize the student’s chances of being admitted to the college of their choice.

Even the ubiquitous college fair is often the scene for panicked parents and overwhelmed students to act out part of this drama, journalists note. “Parking was chaotic, with visitors crowding cars onto the school’s lawns and in no-parking lanes to create spots,” Gordon wrote for the *New York Times*. Journalists suggest they should be more prepared for the experience – they should become, as the *Boston Globe* suggested in an editorial, “educated and savvy consumers” (“Blinded By,” 2006).

The Hunt

The “travel agent” role identified by Dunnewind is a key element in the *hunt* frame that emerges from coverage of the application process. Parents and students fan out across the country, in hopes of collecting critical information and crucial face-to-

face contacts at a college fair or during a campus visit. Journalists emphasize that these journeys are vital to securing a slot at a good college.

Just as peripatetic are the admissions representatives who staff admissions fairs and application events. It may be helpful to think of admissions representatives as appraisers. They travel from place to place, estimating the value of college applicants to the universities, which then, in essence, collect the students who will yield a well-rounded, accomplished student body. A *Boston Globe* editorial (2006) suggested that tuition increases, in the end, only bring universities more “collectible” (my use of the word) students thanks to the willingness of well-heeled (and not so well-heeled) parents to foot the increased bill. Admissions representatives exude as much zeal as students, constantly keeping track of their progress. Frey (2006) reported a warning from the University of Washington to students that they should continue to get good grades, even during senior year. Just as a collector monitors the market for an item, “UW checks students’ final grades and confirms their course work by reviewing their high school transcripts” (p. B1).

Like parents and students, admissions representatives make up a “center for accumulated energy” whose task is to collect the kind of applicants most desired by their university. “I travel from one end of the state to the other,” said a representative of the College Foundation of North Carolina, who had just attended an online college application event. Ensuring that more than 100 students successfully completed their applications was worth the travel, and the at times chaotic interaction with them, she said (Abernethy, 2006). A journalist described the chaos: “Seven seniors huddled together comparing an impressive list of colleges they’d applied to,” he wrote in the article’s lead. School officials and admissions counselors “descended” on their high school to field questions. But the chaos is worth it, suggested Abernethy. The “end-product – more than 100 students with multiple college applications completed – had administrators and admissions counselors heralding a chance in Greene County’s mindset,” he wrote.

What’s troubling is the treatment of the student as a commodity to be collected. A college consultant told Pope (2006) that universities have become quite skilled at “going out and shaking the trees around the country.” When a top school “goes to your city and has a dog and pony show, that does rustle up interest among the sophisticated students,” he said.

Universities have simplified the hunt – and extended their reach – by creating an array of online application tools. “Web-savvy teens are downloading applications, sending messages to admissions staff and taking virtual campus tours – all to ease the load of paperwork, deadlines, and time investment,” wrote Hsuan (2006, p. 12). Bringing these tools to bear on the application process is reminiscent of how the process of collecting was forever changed by the advent of eBay – without the actual auction, of course. At Ramapo College, writes Fabiano (2006), admissions counselors hold “Immediate Decision Days,” where students can “submit applications, participate in an on-site admissions interview, and receive a decision – all within a few hours.” This streamlined approach calls to mind watching the popular PBS series *Antiques Roadshow* – bring your child and get an on-the-spot appraisal from our experts.

Journalists tell of parents and students wandering dutifully, but sometimes confusedly, from one college fair to another, some of which are very well attended and include admissions representatives from top schools. Stern conveyed a sense of “the hunt” by describing parents “swarming” to these events. Stern described one parent’s incredulous reaction to the more than 300 booths set up at a college fair in California. “There was nothing like this when Stevenson decided to go to California State University, Hayward. His daughter, a junior at Granite Bay High School, already is immersed in a search for the best college,” Stern wrote.

Very late in his article, Stern quotes a parent whose children looked beyond the Ivy League and found happiness at smaller schools by pursuing courses of study in which they were truly interested. Still, the fear of parents overtakes their desire to help their children find their true passion. “I think parents are still in true panic mode right now,” the parent told Stern. More than any other group whose behavior was dissected by these reporters, parents seem to be the most consumed by the “essential force of the clan” described by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton. Said one admissions consultant to Berman (2006, p. 12): “The parents are crazy and they are making each other crazier and crazier, investing more and more money and time into their child’s chances of gaining acceptance to a top college. Each year I think it can’t get any worse, but it does.” Journalists tend to attribute the craziness to a desire for status. For many parents, writes, Pope (2006), “a child at a big-named school is especially valuable social currency.” It seems reasonable to argue that parents are just as often act unselfishly as they help their children.

Parents urge their children to view every experience as a possible stepping-stone to getting into a better college. In short, they urge their children to embark on hunts of their own. “Summer is your child’s chance to win the edge,” the author of a how-to admissions guide told Dunnewind (2006). “Downtime should provide constructive fun.” In an earlier paragraph, the author noted that families seeking to send one of their own to college are “less concerned about independence and more focused on family collaboration as a way to beat the competition.” In short, they urge parents to turn their families into the “centers of accumulated energy” described by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (p. 35). The search – the “hunt” as described by several students quoted in these articles – seems to give parents a skewed sense of purpose. But the investment of energy detailed by reporters comes at an unexplored cost: damaging the student’s desire to simply experience the world.

Dunnewind interviewed the authors of a book who took issue with creating an environment for students filled with “spiraling pressure and angst.” But in order to partake of this wisdom, readers of the article would have to go out and buy the book – add it to their collection of admissions-related materials. The article concluded with a list of suggested behaviors for parents who don’t want to cross the line separating “I’m a supportive parent” from “we’ll do anything to get in.”

Often, suggest journalists, students who procrastinate – who aren’t for the moment defined by the destination of their applications – must reengage, even if it means giving up time that they could spend doing purportedly more enjoyable things. Schevitz (2006) led an article with a description of lagging students who would be “holed up” during their holiday breaks because they hadn’t mailed out their applications. Some would certainly be “taking along laptops on ski trips” in order to

correct the problem. One parent's hunt took her on a flight from Los Angeles from Oakland to make sure that she submitted her daughter's application on time. She was greeted at the admissions department by a pile of applications.

Packaging

Journalists suggest that students eyeing colleges should properly *package* themselves. A collection must, after all, be properly and engagingly displayed. "We're looking for the total package," said a Northwestern University official (Glueck, 2006). This frame differs slightly from the *checklist* frame discussed earlier in that the focus is on how students promote themselves using the items they have so feverishly collected. As with all of the behaviors discussed in this paper, the significance of attractive packing should start at a young age.

Fabiano's (2006) description of Eric, a New Jersey high school senior, seems taken right from an online dating service: he "heaves a mean shot-put, plays in the marching band, and is active in student government." And his platform during a recent run for student government? "I'm an everyday guy," he told Fabiano. Eric joined 40 other high school seniors at Ramapo College's "Immediate Decision Day." Joanna claimed that she "nailed" her interview with a Ramapo official. An essential element of a successful package, stress journalists, is being yourself – or at least convincing an admissions official that you believe you can be yourself at his or her university.

Eric's personal essay was fairly standard, Fabiano suggested. He wrote about the struggle to lose weight in order to recapture his health, and his effort to keep the weight off. But in the interview, he revealed to a Ramapo official that he really wants to "open his own pudding shop." He cited a general lack of pudding shops in our cities and towns. "But keep it on the down-low," Eric reportedly told the beguiled official. Reading Fabiano's story, and others like it, reveals a distinct *American Idol* flavor. "Let the competition begin," wrote Navas (2006, p. 16).

To create a compelling package, according to journalists, now usually requires parents to spend exorbitant sums of money to hire one of what seems to be a growing number of independent admissions counselors, tutors, and coaches. A tutor interviewed by Berman (2006) confirmed the importance of this relatively new tactic. "I'd say that on average, at least 60 percent of the high school students in private school have some kind of tutor," the former marketing executive said. A doctoral candidate reported being inundated with requests from parents for assistance. "I actually can't keep up with demand," the doctoral candidate told Berman. The parent of an eighth-grader wanted the candidate's help preparing for the SAT's. "I giggled and told her that for the grand 'ol rate of \$1,000 an hour I could begin working with her daughter next week. I was kidding. She wasn't."

Stevenson (2006) continued the dating service theme: "Every application should have a consistent message. Emphasize a distinctive persona." He concluded: "give readers a unique tagline to remember you by." It is as if students are being asked to compile copy for a Sotheby's auction brochure. Admissions officials place little emphasis on what students actually learned from, or how they were impacted by, the experiences in their applications. Subheadings used in a story by Emerson (2006)

included, “Quality over Quantity”; “It’s Not Who You Know”; and “Don’t Be Cute.” A student interviewed by Churnin (2006) offered similar packaging advice: “Pace yourself,” “specialize,” and “save money.” This “tips” approach embraced by journalists supports the claim by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 8) that the aggressive pursuit of objects damages our ability to “experience the world, to process information, to pursue goals.” The experience of high school juniors and seniors is reduced to collecting attractive experiences – not enjoying them – and cobbling them together into a compelling package. They invest all of this energy, Windsor suggests, “to the exclusion of other possibilities” (p. 49). Through these frames, journalists and the experts they consult urge students to focus solely on how their experiences will make them more attractive to universities acting clearly as collectors.

Journalists also instruct students not to see their lives, now and in the future, as integrated wholes, but as a series of “fragmented” and “changeable” events, as Windsor suggests (p. 49). Worrying incessantly about “the perfect blend” (Churnin, 2006) of experiences prevents students from truly learning anything from them, or pursuing a path in life that enables them to see the unity in the experiences. A few educators do, however, seem to regret subjecting students to this much stress so soon. One guidance counselor, interviewed by Hill (2006, p. B1), said he wanted his students to “freely explore their possibilities without feeling any more anxious than is absolutely necessary.” His fervent hope is that “they enjoy their senior year, college, and the rest of their lives.” Such a sentiment is rare in the coverage explored here.

Conclusions

All of the parties involved in the college admissions process are collectors, at least as described the journalists whose work is analyzed here. The collecting mindset must be adopted if students and parents are to deal effectively with the heightened sense of urgency advanced in these frames. Parents, regardless of income level, are urged to buy the correct books, visit the requisite number of fairs, and to think of their son or daughter’s college experience as just one more piece of social currency that they can place on their own “shelf.” Once only seen in areas where the better schools are located, the “admissions anxiety” (Pope, 2006) now grips parents in all parts of the country – “regions that had been relatively sheltered from such pressure.” Students from poorer families can take advantage of a range of workshops (Nyhan, 2006, p. B1) and use new online tools to ensure that they can be part of the process – and experience the pressure along with their wealthier classmates.

Students are persuaded that they must begin their collecting early, as early as junior high school. They must set out to zealously collect the “right” achievements and experiences – those that will coalesce into a package attractive to their desired college destinations. The experience consumes them; rarely do journalists talk about life beyond the application process. The value of an experience is measured by how much it can enhance the package so assiduously constructed by parents and students. Journalists suggest that these experiences are all roughly the same, in terms of what they contribute to the student’s chances of gaining admission. The meaning of the events, the history behind them, “dissolves,” as Baudrillard would suggest, as the importance of the event to the overall package becomes clear.

College recruiters and admissions counselors collect worthy students for their institutions. They travel just as much as parents and students do, like collectors in search of the next great flea market or tag sale. They have set the market conditions, and now seek to capitalize. They too have created a compelling story about their institutions, based on their arrangement of attributes and experiences purportedly desired by parents and students. All three groups show all of the signs of being the “centers of accumulated energy” described by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton. The checklist, panic, hunt, and packaging frames seen in the work of reporters suggest that the experiences (for the students), information (for the parents), and the students themselves (for the admissions representatives) are, like objects sought by a collector, “charged” by the amount of energy invested by these groups in their searches. They are swept away by the “essential force of the clan.”

As with any frames, competing impressions of the college application experience are not made available to the reader. A more nuanced view of the application experience does not appear in these stories. By relying on these frames, reporters do not expose readers to the fullest possible range of experiences and information. Their work encourages a limited understanding of what happens during this time in a student’s life. Certainly there must be college students out there for whom the application experience is less than a frantic, ultra-competitive nightmare. Certainly there must be parents who do not obsessively buy guide books, meticulously plan trips to a laundry list of college fairs, and seek the “right” college for their child only so they can affix a university’s bumper sticker to their cars. Journalists have chosen not to write extensively about these parents, opting instead to sustain an ideology that suggests this segment of the college application is filled with angst and panic for, and tinged by the avarice of, all concerned.

Communication researchers should explore news media coverage of other stops on the college journey to determine if this ideology is sustained by journalists as students navigate the college experience.

It is also hoped that this research will cause educators, admissions officers, and parents to reexamine the admissions process and reduce the amount of pressure placed on students as they file their applications. A good start would be to discontinue the practice (engaged in by all three groups) of telling teenagers that selecting the “right” college will solely determine their future success. Obtaining a degree from nearly any accredited institution is often enough to secure employment or set the student on the path to achieving his or her goals. Lessening the influence of business leaders on the development and direction of college curricula – undertaken so that their businesses will be populated by a theoretically inexhaustible supply of properly trained individuals – would go a long way toward adjusting the perception of students that college is far more than a bridge to a job. Teachers at all levels can assist in this endeavor by discouraging their charges from referring to their time in school as a “career” in and of itself.

Students should also be given the space to enjoy their classes and a narrowed range of extracurricular activities, rather than being encouraged to accumulate – or “collect” – these activities solely to augment their applications. The student “packaged” by parents and high school teachers and counselors and “hunted” by admissions officers often only vaguely resembles the student who arrives on a college

campus, such is the degree of packaging that occurs during the admissions process. As hackneyed as it might sound, students should be encouraged to pursue courses of study for which they have, or believe they will develop, a passion. Application materials, particularly their essays, should reflect this passion, and be true to the student's identity, not follow a predetermined script, as was the case with the son of a friend who asked the author to review his application essay before submitting it to the large private college in Pennsylvania which he now attends after a frantic tour of universities and the compilation of a startlingly long list of schools to which he considered applying.

The essay was replete with references to how hard the student worked, and the obstacles he had overcome during high school – all very predictable. The author urged the young man to consider rewriting the essay to better reflect the witty, intelligent, well rounded person he had become. Tell them about a defining moment or describe a significant mistake, the author suggested. The young man gratefully thanked the author for his advice, but went on to revise and submit the “hard work” essay expected by his parents – and the university admissions office.

If nothing else comes of this research, the author hopes that students will be encouraged to see the application process as a time for zeroing in on a passion rather than meeting the expectations of sets of individuals who are engaged in their own forms of “collecting.”

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